Clowning around with dementia

Laughter may be the best medicine for dementia sufferers. Research underway into the long-term benefits of sending in clowns is showing positive results, Susi Hamilton reports.

Clowns are bringing their red noses and colourful costumes into Sydney nursing homes as part of a unique project using humour to change the lives of dementia sufferers.

This follows a pilot that was so successful the nursing home involved raised up to $40,000 to keep the clowns coming back after the trial had finished.

Dr Peter Spitzer, one of the key researchers who often plays the clown himself, says the arrival of the team had an immediate impact on some patients’ lives.

“There was one nursing home resident who had been clinically depressed for a very long time. She would sit in her room all the time and not come out,” Dr Spitzer says. “But the clowns would visit her and she would sit with the group and that would continue even after the clowns left.”

“The family believed it was the clowns that had helped her.”

It was experiences such as these that helped the researchers secure NHMRC funding to roll the project out across 10 nursing homes across Sydney.

“Sending the clowns into the medical arena is Dr Spitzer’s life’s work. The approach is built on a passion for the arts and a belief in the healing power of laughter. With circus performer Jean-Paul Bell, the Southern Highlands GP launched the Humour Foundation that first put clown doctors into the Sydney Children’s Hospital in 1997.”

“The clown is like a partnering of art and medicine. You could say that it’s like bringing the court jester into serious situations,” Dr Spitzer says. “We take the performing arts off the stage and to the bedside.”

Dr Spitzer has seen the medical benefits for children and in palliative care units, but more recently he also saw the clowns could play a positive role in aged care and dementia.

Determined to back up the theory with research, he came to see dementia specialist UNSW Professor Lennart Baker.

As a result, professional clowns — armed with a collection of props, including hats, batelike telephones and puppets — are being sent to nursing homes two hours a week over a three-month period for the study. Their aim is to amuse and entertain, but above all, engage, the residents, some of who can no longer talk.

The clowns draw the residents into their act through tasks as simple as trying on a number of different hats, then asking if each is appropriate to wear on a date.

“‘There is very little connection for people in dementia facilities, especially those with more severe dementia. They get physically taken care of, but they don’t get the emotional connection. It’s about being happy with the person, rather than getting them to laugh per se — but you do get lots of laughter,’” says Dr Lee-Fay Lee from UNSW’s School of Psychiatry, one of the researchers on the project.

The work is focused on mood and quality of life, not improvements to memory.

While family and friends reported Radar’s patients were happier as a result of the trial, other patients also gave positive feedback. They recognised the clowns after six visits and were pleased about them coming.

“The clowns visits are great, but the program is much more than that,” says Dr Low, who notes that it is the active, individualised treatment that works so well for patients. “It’s the idea of humour being part of the life of the facility.”

A staff member, who continues the work of the clowns after they leave, is called the “laughter boss”. They receive special training from Dr Spitzer.

With his doctor’s hat on, Dr Spitzer points out that there are a lot of physical and psychological benefits to laughter, including improved cardiovascular health, increased oxygenation of the brain, the stimulation of the reward centre in the brain, a reduction in depression and enhanced learning.

“Radar was there for a while, you sense that he’s happiest as a clown: ‘Laughter is the shortest distance between two people’ — says Victor Borge,” he says. “There is a special connection that comes from working with people with dementia. It fills the heart, it fulfils a human connection.”

“One of the last things to go with dementia is the sense of humour,” he observes. “Who addresses that, especially if staff are run off their feet? It’s possible to have smiles and laughter in later life ... it changes the journey for everyone.”